CHECKLIST ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

Project Name:	Power Cable and Fiber Optic Joint Utility Project Easement Amendment and Application
Proposed Implementation Date:	Winter 2021/Spring 2022
Proponent:	Triangle Communications Assn, Inc. (Easement #10414 Amendment) Northwestern Energy New Easement Application
Location:	NE¼, NW¼SE¼, N½SW¼, & SW¼SW¼ of Section 16, Township 2 South, Range 15 East (Common Schools Trust) – Sweet Grass County
County:	Sweet Grass County

I. TYPE AND PURPOSE OF ACTION

The Proponents, Triangle Communications Assn, Inc. (TTCA, Inc.) and Northwestern Energy are developing a project to supply underground power and telecommunication cables to a rural residential property on Section 20 Township 2 South, Range 15 East in Sweet Grass County. Northwestern Energy is partnering, and leading the construction of, a joint utilities project that will allow both utilities the ability to run power and telecommunications lines to the rural residence by operating within the same right-of-way corridor. By running jointly, the companies can supply services in an efficient and affordable method. The proposed easement route (see Exhibit A) follows an existing private road right-of-way and is the most direct and efficient path to provide utility services.

Northwestern Energy is applying for a new easement for the installation of a new underground 120/240-volt power line. They are applying for a 10' wide, 1.848-acre, easement to install their underground power line.

Northwestern Energy's portion of the project will consist of installing approximately 8,000' of new #2 aluminum underground primary cable inside a 2" conduit to provide electricity to a rural residential property. In addition to the conduit, Northwestern Energy will install 12 junction-can enclosures to meet grounding regulations. Northwestern Energy is requesting the same 10' wide easement as Triangle Communication so that both utilities can install their cables in the same trench at the same time.

Triangle Communications is seeking to amend their existing 20' wide easement (D#-10414) for the installation of an underground fiber optic line. They want to amend their easement to reflect the new 10' wide, 1.848-acre, easement to be consistent with the new Northwestern Energy easement.

Triangle Communication's portion of the project will consist of amending their current 20' wide easement to a 10' wide easement. They will be replacing outdated existing copper services with fiber optic lines to provide Fiber to the Home (FTTH) service in a remote area. They will leave the copper line in place as a redundancy in case of emergencies while installing a new fiber optic line. The easement will be amended to reflect the additional telecommunications line placed in the easement corridor.

II. PROJECT DEVELOPMENT

1. PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT, AGENCIES, GROUPS OR INDIVIDUALS CONTACTED:

Provide a brief chronology of the scoping and ongoing involvement for this project.

No formal public scoping was performed by DNRC for this proposed project. Triangle Communications obtained a Settlement of Damages form from the grazing lessee.

2. OTHER GOVERNMENTAL AGENCIES WITH JURISDICTION, LIST OF PERMITS NEEDED:

No other government permits are needed.

3. ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED:

Proposed Alternative: Issue the 10' wide new easement to Northwestern Energy and amend D#-10414 easement to Triangle Communications for the underground installation of power and telecommunications utilities across the State Trust Land on Section 16, Township 2 South, Range 15 East in Sweet Grass County.

No Action Alternative: Deny the 10' wide new easement to Northwestern Energy and amend D#-10414 easement to Triangle Communications for the underground installation of power and telecommunications utilities across the State Trust Land on Section 16, Township 2 South, Range 15 East in Sweet Grass County.

III. IMPACTS ON THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

- *RESOURCES potentially impacted are listed on the form, followed by common issues that would be considered.*
- *Explain POTENTIAL IMPACTS AND MITIGATIONS following each resource heading.*
- *Enter "NONE" If no impacts are identified or the resource is not present.*

4. GEOLOGY AND SOIL QUALITY, STABILITY AND MOISTURE:

Consider the presence of fragile, compactable or unstable soils. Identify unusual geologic features. Specify any special reclamation considerations. Identify any cumulative impacts to soils.

The land cover of the proposed alternative is considered recently disturbed and modified areas that are categorized as Post-Fire Recovery and Burned Sagebrush. These land types account for over 75% percent of the section of State Land. The remaining area is categorized as Rocky Mountain Lower Montane, Foothill, and Valley Grassland and Rocky Mountain Subapline-Montana Mesic Meadow. According the NRCS Soil Survey, the area consists of Ashbon-Winkler Weedzunit complex soils and rock outcrop complexes. These soils are known for typically having large slopes and are very gravelly sandy loams. These features make for a very gravelly soil with fast drainage and shallow soils. The underlaying geologic bed is comprised of Slide Mountain Volcanics, which are mainly igneous type rocks with some sedimentary rock layers.

The route proposed in the two easements is generally located adjacent to a private road, a portion of which has an easement granted from the State for access to private lands to the south. The power and fiber optic cable will be installed using a direct plow method that entails opening the ground with a plow blade pulled behind a tracked cable plow. This method creates a narrow opening in the soil, inserts the cable, covers cable and smooths the disturbed soil in a single pass. This installation method is considered trenchless. Based on the proposed action and relatively short disturbance time for project, no significant adverse impacts to geology and soils are expected by implementing the proposed action.

5. WATER QUALITY, QUANTITY AND DISTRIBUTION:

Identify important surface or groundwater resources. Consider the potential for violation of ambient water quality standards, drinking water maximum contaminant levels, or degradation of water quality. Identify cumulative effects to water resources.

Much of the work will occur outside drainage systems. However, the proposed easements will cross Cedar Creek, an intermittent drainage system, where a culvert is currently installed along the private road. The proponent will be using a horizontal drill method to go below the drainage and no disturbance will occur inside the drainage or streambed. No significant adverse impacts to water quality, quantity or distribution are anticipated by implementing the proposed action.

6. AIR QUALITY:

What pollutants or particulate would be produced? Identify air quality regulations or zones (e.g. Class I air shed) the project would influence. Identify cumulative effects to air quality.

There may be short-term isolated impacts from the equipment exhaust that is used to install the utilities. No significant adverse impacts to air quality are expected by implementing the proposed action.

7. VEGETATION COVER, QUANTITY AND QUALITY:

What changes would the action cause to vegetative communities? Consider rare plants or cover types that would be affected. Identify cumulative effects to vegetation.

The power and fiber optic cables are proposed to be installed using direct plow method that entails opening the ground with a plow blade pulled behind a tracked cable plow. This method creates a narrow opening in the soil, inserts the cables, covers said cables, and smooths the disturbed soil in a single pass. This installation method is considered trenchless. The proposed action is adjacent to an existing private road. The area disturbed by the installation activity and from vehicle travel could have short term impacts on vegetation. Upon completion of the work, the proponent will re-seed the disturbed area. The proponent has secured a lessee settlement form from the lessee. No significant long-term adverse impacts to vegetative cover, quantity or quality are expected as a result of implementing the proposed alternative.

8. TERRESTRIAL, AVIAN AND AQUATIC LIFE AND HABITATS:

Consider substantial habitat values and use of the area by wildlife, birds or fish. Identify cumulative effects to fish and wildlife.

A variety of big game (deer, elk and mountain lions), small mammals, raptors, and songbirds traverse the subject sections. The proposed project activities could temporarily disrupt wildlife movement and patterns while construction is scheduled to occur. Due to the relatively short project duration and nature no significant adverse impacts to terrestrial, avian and aquatic life and habitats are expected to occur as a result of implementing the proposed alternative.

9. UNIQUE, ENDANGERED, FRAGILE OR LIMITED ENVIRONMENTAL RESOURCES:

Consider any federally listed threatened or endangered species or habitat identified in the project area. Determine effects to wetlands. Consider Sensitive Species or Species of special concern. Identify cumulative effects to these species and their habitat.

A search of the Montana Natural Heritage Program database indicated the following species of concern have been observed with the general area:

- **Grizzly Bear** *(Ursus arctos),* **Preble's Shrew** *(Sorex preblei)*
- **Yellowstone Cutthroat Trout** *(Oncorhynchus clarkii bouvieri)*

Fish species of concern have been listed in this Environmental Assessment as they have been identified within 1 mile of the site. The Yellowstone Cutthroat Trout is found within the Lower Deer Creek perennial stream and Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks maintains a fish barrier on Lower Deer Creek on this parcel. However, no disturbance to the Lower Deer Creek water source will occur in the proposed alternative.

While these species may be present in the general project area, no direct or lasting impacts are expected to occur to sensitive species. Due to the short duration and minimal disturbance, the project will have minimal impact to the environment and habitat on State Land.

10. HISTORICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES:

Identify and determine effects to historical, archaeological or paleontological resources.

The following cultural and paleontological surveys have been previously performed:

- 2001 – 2001-5-1 and 2001-5-3 (addendum)
    - No Cultural or Paleontological Resources identified.
- 2001 – 2010-2-1
    - No Cultural or Paleontological Resources identified.

A Class I (literature review) level review was conducted by the DNRC staff archaeologist for the area of potential effect (APE). This entailed inspection of project maps, DNRC's sites/site leads database, land use records, General Land Office Survey Plats, and control cards. The Class I search revealed that no cultural or paleontological resources have been identified in the project APE. No additional archaeological investigative work will be conducted in response to this proposed development. However, if previously unknown cultural or paleontological materials are identified during project related activities, all work will cease until a professional assessment of such resources can be made.

The proposed project will have *No Effect* to *Antiquities* as defined under the Montana State Antiquities Act. Formal reports of findings are available through the DNRC and the Montana State Historic Preservation Officer.

11. AESTHETICS:

Determine if the project is located on a prominent topographic feature or may be visible from populated or scenic areas. What level of noise, light or visual change would be produced? Identify cumulative effects to aesthetics.

The proposed action would result in the installation of underground power and fiber optic cables adjacent and parallel to established private road right-of-way. Once the easement areas are rehabbed from the installation disturbance, the only indication that there is an underground power and fiber optic line would be from any above-ground warning markers. No significant adverse impact to aesthetics is expected as a result of implementing the proposed alternative.

12. DEMANDS ON ENVIRONMENTAL RESOURCES OF LAND, WATER, AIR OR ENERGY:

Determine the amount of limited resources the project would require. Identify other activities nearby that the project would affect. Identify cumulative effects to environmental resources.

No significant adverse impacts to environmental resources of land, water, air or energy are expected to occur as a result of implementing the proposed alternative.

13. OTHER ENVIRONMENTAL DOCUMENTS PERTINENT TO THE AREA:

List other studies, plans or projects on this tract. Determine cumulative impacts likely to occur as a result of current private, state or federal actions in the analysis area, and from future proposed state actions in the analysis area that are under MEPA review (scoped) or permitting review by any state agency.

No other projects are known on this portion of state-owned land at this time

IV. IMPACTS ON THE HUMAN POPULATION

- *RESOURCES potentially impacted are listed on the form, followed by common issues that would be considered.*
- *Explain POTENTIAL IMPACTS AND MITIGATIONS following each resource heading.*
- *Enter "NONE" If no impacts are identified or the resource is not present.*

14. HUMAN HEALTH AND SAFETY:

Identify any health and safety risks posed by the project.

No significant adverse impacts to human health and safety would occur as a result of implementing the proposed alternative.

15. INDUSTRIAL, COMMERCIAL AND AGRICULTURE ACTIVITIES AND PRODUCTION:

Identify how the project would add to or alter these activities.

The proponents have submitted lessee settlement forms and the section is not suited for cropland. Due to the short nature of the project and minimal disturbance, no significant adverse impacts to industrial, commercial and agricultural activities and production would occur as a result of implementing the proposed alternative.

16. QUANTITY AND DISTRIBUTION OF EMPLOYMENT:

Estimate the number of jobs the project would create, move or eliminate. Identify cumulative effects to the employment market.

The proposed action will have no significant impact on the quantity and distribution of employment.

17. LOCAL AND STATE TAX BASE AND TAX REVENUES:

Estimate tax revenue the project would create or eliminate. Identify cumulative effects to taxes and revenue.

The proposed action will have no adverse impact on tax revenue.

18. DEMAND FOR GOVERNMENT SERVICES:

Estimate increases in traffic and changes to traffic patterns. What changes would be needed to fire protection, police, schools, etc.? Identify cumulative effects of this and other projects on government services

The implementation of the proposed alternative will not generate any additional demands on governmental services.

19. LOCALLY ADOPTED ENVIRONMENTAL PLANS AND GOALS:

List State, County, City, USFS, BLM, Tribal, and other zoning or management plans, and identify how they would affect this project.

Implementation of the proposed alternative will not conflict with any locally adopted plans.

20. ACCESS TO AND QUALITY OF RECREATIONAL AND WILDERNESS ACTIVITIES:

Identify any wilderness or recreational areas nearby or access routes through this tract. Determine the effects of the project on recreational potential within the tract. Identify cumulative effects to recreational and wilderness activities.

The proposed project will have no long-term effect on access to and quality of recreational and wilderness activities.

21. DENSITY AND DISTRIBUTION OF POPULATION AND HOUSING:

Estimate population changes and additional housing the project would require. Identify cumulative effects to population and housing.

No significant adverse impacts to density and distribution of population and housing would occur as a result of implementing the proposed alternative.

22. SOCIAL STRUCTURES AND MORES:

Identify potential disruption of native or traditional lifestyles or communities.

There are no native, unique or traditional lifestyles or communities in the vicinity that would be impacted by the proposed alternative.

23. CULTURAL UNIQUENESS AND DIVERSITY:

How would the action affect any unique quality of the area?

The proposed alternative will not have a significant adverse impact on cultural uniqueness or diversity.

24. OTHER APPROPRIATE SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CIRCUMSTANCES:

Estimate the return to the trust. Include appropriate economic analysis. Identify potential future uses for the analysis area other than existing management. Identify cumulative economic and social effects likely to occur as a result of the proposed action.

The Common Schools Trust will benefit by getting a one-time fee of $4,802.00 for the ±1.848-acre ***amended*** easement from Triangle Communications.

The Common Schools Trust will also benefit by getting a one-time fee of $5,544.00 for the ±1.848-acre ***new*** easement from Northwestern Energy.

The **total** benefit to the Trust will be $10,346.00.

EA Checklist Prepared By:	**Name:**	Joe Holzwarth	**Date:**	10 November 2021
	Title:	Area Planner, Southern Land Office		

V. FINDING

25. ALTERNATIVE SELECTED:

The proposed alternative has been selected and it is recommended that the State grants a new easement to Northwestern Energy to allow the installation of a new underground power line and amends the existing easement to allow Triangle Telecommunications to install a new fiber optic line in their easement corridor to provide utilities to a rural residential property.

26. SIGNIFICANCE OF POTENTIAL IMPACTS:

The potential for significant adverse impacts to the Trust lands listed above are minimal due to the nature of the proposed action which would entail the issuing of the easements and installation of underground power and fiber optic cables. The installation and disturbance are expected to be completed in a short timeframe. In addition, the proponents are proposing to install the power and fiber optic cables at the same time in the same trench. This will help reduce any potential impacts to the Trust land or natural environment. The easements are located adjacent to an existing private road right-of-way. There are no natural features that could produce adverse impacts or species of concern occupying the parcels that are expected to be impacted by implementing the proposed action.

27. NEED FOR FURTHER ENVIRONMENTAL ANALYSIS:

☐ EIS ☐ More Detailed EA ☒ No Further Analysis

EA Checklist Approved By:	**Name:**	Jeff Bollman
	Title:	Area Manager, Southern Land Office
Signature: Jeff Bollman		**Date:** 3December 2021

Exhibit A – Easement Amendment Location